

# Nationalist Allegory in North Korea: The Revolutionary Opera *Sea of Blood*

*Alzo David-West*

## Biographical Statement

Alzo David-West holds an English (Multicultural Literature) MA degree from East Carolina University and an English BA degree *magna cum laude* from Chowan University. He is a former graduate student of the late Ethnic Studies scholar Dr. Gay Wilentz. His areas of academic interest include Multicultural American Literature, World Literature in English/Translation, and Literary Theory and Criticism. Alzo David-West has lived in metropolitan Nigeria, New York City, and North Carolina.

## Abstract

This essay explores the symbolic mode of *nationalist allegory* in *Sea of Blood* to explain that the preeminent “revolutionary opera” of Stalinist North Korea does not belong to the tradition of literary realism. The opera constructs a closed epic universe, the mythopoeic setting and flat characters of which belie the official North Korean government claim that *Sea of Blood* is a historically faithful representation of the Manchurian guerrilla struggle against Japanese imperialism, colonialism, and fascism in the 1930s.

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English Department, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858; adavidwest@yahoo.com

## Introduction

Based on the 1969 film of the same name, adapted by the Phibada Opera Troupe under the supervision of Kim Jong Il, and performed over 1,500 times since its premier at the Pyongyang Grand Theater in July 1971, *Sea of Blood* stands as the foremost Stalinist “revolutionary opera” in North Korea. The fountainhead of the *socialist realist* “*Sea of Blood*–style opera,” it is also the first of the “five revolutionary operas.” *Sea of Blood* contains a relatively uncomplicated plot: a beleaguered Korean peasant mother in colonial-era Manchuria loses her husband and youngest son to the Japanese Imperial Army and subsequently joins the national-liberation guerrilla struggle of Kim Il Sung. Although the work supposedly delineates the ideological and moral transformation from passive victim to politically committed national hero, *Sea of Blood* is a homiletic *nationalist allegory* whose officially designated “truthfulness” is betrayed by a crude symbolic mode that departs from everyday life. Profound sociological and aesthetic incongruities make the production artistically false and misleading. The mythopoeic representations and *nationalist allegory* of the North Korean opera render it antithetical to the objective characteristics of a realistic literature.

## Nationalist Allegory

What is *nationalist allegory*? It is an orthodox Marxist term, derived from Leon Trotsky’s 1923 classic *Literature and Revolution*, which defines an anti-realist pseudo-art that is essentially religious and/or moralistic and characterized by an irrational reactionary fixation with the archaic nation-state system. The most indubitable feature of this conservative, idealist symbolic mode is that it not only fixates on, but apotheosizes the bourgeois national state, placing it above time, space, and society in one way or another. *Nationalist allegories* may be of an ultra-relativist or populist or totalitarian character. Whatever fetishistic incarnation it assumes, the allegorized nation state and its representative forms and figures function as false ideological abstractions for the activities of certain (possibly, but not necessarily, marginalized) social groups, imagined communities, or racial populations. The nation state is turned into a “mystical” symbol in the narrative text and becomes a god or an idol into which is projected a lost sense of *wholeness*, a lost sense of *being* in the world. Consequently, the literary demography therein is torn away from life and ceases to be *truly social* in its *human essence*, that is, *truly international*. The aesthetic character of *nationalist allegory*, based ultimately in social inequality and alienation, is pathogenic and signifies an ailing or repressed artistic consciousness. In this deep-going spiritual crisis, the truthful objective element and value of art is, if not altogether absent, compromised by the subjectivism and ideology of the producer of *nationalist allegory*. The *nationalist allegorist*, who is essentially a national opportunist with a talent for the pen or brush, ignores the objective lessons of history, religiously invests in a moribund nineteenth-century political system, and attempts to stir deep

emotional forces and reactions in the reader or audience in order to valorize an eternal national identity and national separatism.

The content of *nationalist allegory* is unlike that of American critical theorist Fredric Jameson's well-known and disputatious concept of "national allegory," which is basically a symbolic commentary or diagnostic critique of the nation in "third-world" literatures (Jameson, 1986). *Nationalist allegory* is a symbolic infatuation, defense, and mystification of the decaying nation-state form in the epoch of imperialism, that is, the epoch of world economy and the domination of finance capital. But if it is backwards and retrogressive, how can *nationalist allegory* genuinely entice the writer or reader, as it has done in and outside North Korea? Does this suggest something inherently appealing about allegoricity, about the aesthetic predominance of the allegorical at the expense of the real? Perhaps what can be called the core paradox of *nationalist allegory* is that even though it is a form of "pseudo-art"—the equivalent of philosophical idealism in the realm of art (Voronsky, 1998, p. 101)—it retains that property which is universally peculiar to artistic productions: to speak directly to the emotions and force reason into silence. "One cannot believe in art without becoming a bit foolish, without becoming temporarily ignorant, or without acknowledging the most extraordinary things" (p. 373). Art enchants, overwhelms, even mystifies, with the power of irrational aesthetic forces. Indeed, the paradox is that the purely logical or syllogistic approach of allegory destroys the question of artistic form, since art is an emotional thing. But because allegory makes use of certain artistic devices and techniques—at least on the surface level—it is in the nature of allegory to connect with the irrational component of the human mind.

*Sea of Blood* is an unmistakably nationalistic and allegorical work that operates within the framework of the nationalist Stalinist theory of "socialism in one country," which North Korean authorities dress up as the *Juche* (national subjectivism) ideology. The "revolutionary opera" can and does appeal (more to some, less to others) to certain irrational psychological cravings that are rooted in the material conditions of social life. A martial peasant epic in the tradition of the Medieval *pyschomachia*—an apologetic and homiletic religious poem in which personified virtues and vices battle for mastery in the human soul—it stands as a scripturally simplistic vengeance narrative. Considering the different material and historical bases, the opera cannot simply be conflated with, for example, fourth-century Latin poet Prudentius' "Psychomachia"; however, *Sea of Blood* evidently shares enough typological and thematic characteristics to be placed under the Medieval *pyschomachian* tradition established by that sanguinary military Christian epic. Seen in this light, the development of North Korean *nationalist allegory* might have some connection with late President Kim Il Sung's Presbyterian Christian family background. Kim attended church in his youth and even taught Sunday school in the late 1920s (Ch'oe, 1986, p. 1089). Religious messianism certainly informs his national-Stalinist world outlook, and it is possible that the original and subsequent productions of *Sea of Blood* incorporate some of the more militant aspects of Christian ideology.

## Background of the Opera

Reportedly, *Sea of Blood* has its origins when a twenty-year-old Kim Il Sung learned of the April 1932 anti-communist, anti-Korean “mop up” campaign in Jian-dao prefecture in northeastern Manchuria, which became the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in 1931. He writes in his reminiscences, *With the Century*, that “Jian-dao was literally a sea of blood; dozens and even hundreds of people were massacred everyday by the swords and bayonets of the [Japanese] ‘punitive’ troops” (Kim Il Sung, 2004b). According to Korean sources at the time, some 250,000 Koreans, mostly innocent peasants, were slaughtered (Cumings, 2004, p. 110)—a staggering figure since the number of Koreans in Jiandao was around 400,000, over 60 percent of the Manchurian population, in 1930. Kim claims to have been especially inspired by the heroism of women and mothers in the face of these fascist attacks, and contemplated producing a dramatic work on the subject.

After consulting with a partisan named Lee Tong Baek, who suggested portraying a “genuine woman of Korea,” Kim developed the image of the mother figure of his intended play. She would be an archetypical female resistance fighter, “a simple woman [...] who recovers from her grief over the loss of her husband and child in a sea of blood to take up the path of [armed] struggle” (Kim Il Sung, 2004b). Interestingly, Kim makes no reference to an earlier-mentioned encounter with Maxim Gorky’s 1907 novel *Mother* in Chinese translation during his days at Yuwen Middle School in 1928 (Kim Il Sung, 2004a). That work became the most esteemed heroic novel in the canon of Soviet-Stalinist *socialist realism* from the 1930s. Despite the peasant-guerrilla ethos that renders Kim’s maternal personification of armed struggle incompatible with Gorky’s antiwar Bolshevik worker-mother, there is a possibility that Kim drew on superficial aspects of the novel from memory. *Sea of Blood* and *Mother* are, to be sure, only superficially resonant. And it is precisely on the thematic and compositional levels of “story” and “plot” structure—which are not the same thing—where the play and novel diverge significantly. Both works, however, are forms of heroic fiction.

Kim, who was expelled from middle school and had no formal background in theater, admits that there was neither artist nor writer in his Chinese Communist Party (CCP) guerrilla unit when *Sea of Blood* was collaboratively written and performed on a makeshift stage in the eastern Manchurian village of Manjiang, Fusong County, in 1936. Considering, moreover, that most of his partisans were either illiterate or had no education beyond primary school, the ragged amateurism of the production can only be imagined. But that was probably not a problem for the culturally backwards and ideologically dualistic consciousness of the target peasant audience. Furthermore, Kim’s play was designed as a form of anti-colonial propaganda theater to attract, in his words, “ignorant mountain people [...] to become active participants in the anti-Japanese revolution and its supporters” (Kim Il Sung, 2004b). *Sea of Blood* was apparently a recruiting success in Manjiang and made the provincial locale a reliable supply base for Kim and his partisan forces. One can sur-

mise that this indubitably allegorical work relied heavily on melodrama and pathos, as well as evoked what were certainly justifiable—though politically exploited—feelings of Korean patriotism in reaction to the social traumas of colonial slavery, exile, and murder.

Since *Sea of Blood* was readapted from the 1969 film version as a “revolutionary opera” in 1971, both under the supervision of Kim’s son and heir Kim Jong Il, it has been hailed in North Korea as a “historic turning point” and “perfect revolutionary opera” (Kim Jong Il, 2001a pp. 1, 14). Despite claims to the thematic originality and technical innovations of *Sea of Blood*, its history—not to mention Kim Jong Il’s ascendance in the North Korean arts bureaucracy from 1964—coincides with Mao Zedong’s ultra-leftist Cultural Revolution in 1966 to 1976. Although Kim Il Sung was frightened by the political anarchy and irrationalism of this period in modern Chinese history, it does not mean that Bonapartist Maoist-Stalinist theories of the arts were not assimilated in North Korea. Korea scholar and musicologist Keith Howard observes, for instance, that North Korean “revolutionary opera” derives from the so-called “model works” (*yangbanxi*) produced under Mao’s wife Jiang Qing. Two specific examples are *The Red Lantern* and *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (2000, p. 121), both produced in 1964 and preceding the cinematic and operatic versions of *Sea of Blood* by five and seven years respectively. Three of the alleged North Korean innovations in its national socialist realist musical theater are dynamic three-dimensional stage settings, stanzaic songs based on peasant-folk music, and *pangchang* (an off-stage singing chorus), which in anti-Brechtian fashion constructs emotional links between character and spectator and controls the audience’s interpretation of events. These appear in Maoist “revolutionary opera.”

Of course, while *Sea of Blood* evinces strong influence from the Chinese Cultural Revolution, it also reflects Kim Il Sung’s background as a past member of the CCP operating under the Maoist program of peasant guerrilla war from approximately 1931 to 1941. But as a *nationalist allegory* created in North Korea, *Sea of Blood* specifically thematizes the social attitudes and (romanticized) national guerrilla tradition of Kim Il Sung and his comrades-in-arms after they deposed their political rivals in the post-Korean War Great Purge of 1956 to 1960, secured former partisans in all sections of North Korean government by 1966, and gave the Stalinist regime the character of a “guerrilla state” with its uniquely identifiable national-Stalinist mythography, heroic legends, and cult of personality. Reflecting this political milieu and its nationalistic military tradition, Kim Jong Il explains that the theme of *Sea of Blood* is “that blood must be repaid with blood and that violence must be countered with violence” (2001b, p. 30). He also states that the opera embodies a “great truth” which maintains “that where there is oppression, there is always resistance and the oppressed people can only liberate themselves and secure a happy future through armed struggle” (2001b, p. 54). The basic logic behind these slogans can be broken down into an equation: Oppression + Retribution + Armed Struggle = A Happy Future. What is revealed in all of this is an arithmetical teleological reasoning that fuses moralism, national-Stalinism, and guerrillaism. That is also what helps give the *nationalist allegorism* of *Sea of Blood* its military *psychomachian* quality.

## Time, Space, and History

According to Kim Jong Il, *Sea of Blood* describes the true historical background of the 1930s (2001a, p. 28). The speciousness of this claim is exposed by the opera's closed epic universe, as well as its absence of complex characterization, realistic precision, and *historical time*. *Sea of Blood* unfolds in an extra-historical time-space in which ideology and subjectivism freely distort its pseudo-artistic images. Although the events may have a historical point of reference, the "revolutionary opera" is dictated by the general laws of *mythic time*. Consequently, the reader or spectator cannot determine its actual socio-temporal coordinates and is only left with vague impressions as to where and when exactly everything is occurring. Geographically, one knows the dramatic action takes place in southeastern Manchuria. The clues are Pyoljae village in north Jiandao and Sangdong village near Mount Paekdu. Manchuria, however, is never referred to by name, only in the Mother's words as "this strange place," "this alien land," "this bleak land," "this remote place across Chonam Pass," and "this barren land" (*Sea of Blood*, 1977, pp. 7, 8, 31). Interestingly, the effect is that of a displaced Korean people lost in the wilderness, an image with an undeniably Biblical resonance. In any case, the absence of *historical time* renders the geography aesthetically problematic. This is illustrated in the episodic shifts in the narrative and in the fact that it also relies on the *seasonal time* of peasant tradition, which creates a structurally static and cyclic narrative cosmos. Act 1 opens in the summer of the "early 1930s" and an unspecified "few years" elapse. Thereafter, a new year begins with Act 2 (spring), Acts 3–5 (summer), and Acts 6–7 (autumn). Only until Act 4 does one learn from the character Gyong Chol's Mother that "ten long years" have passed since Act 1. This places the story in about 1932 and 1942, respectively. There, however, are problems with the periodization.

One suspects that Act 1 is set in 1932 considering that the character Pyoljae Village Elder mentions the founding of Kim Il Sung's guerrilla army in the spring. According to North Korean political lore, Kim established an independent guerrilla unit in April 1932, a period contemporaneous with the slaughter at Jiandao. On the other hand, the year 1942 appears untenable, since Kim Il Sung and his partisans were defeated by Japanese expeditionary forces in 1941 and fled into the Soviet Far East (Suh, 1988). These details become a quandary only when one makes the mistake of reading *Sea of Blood* in terms of *historical time*. Rather, what is occurring after Act 1 is that the peasant epic conflates real, exaggerated, and fictive events in its mythic time-space, particularly, the majority of Kim Il Sung's guerrilla skirmishes with the Japanese colonial army and police fought mostly in southern and south-eastern Manchuria from the mid-1930s onwards. The largest and most successful of these was a June 1937 raid over the Manchurian border into the Korean town of Pochonbo, which Kim and his partisans took for a day and destroyed the Japanese garrison. Specifically, the guerrillas killed Japanese colonial police, committed arson, extorted money from the local population, and recruited almost ninety Koreans into their company (Suh, 1988, pp. 34, 36, 38). North Korean Stalinist historiography interprets this inconclusive raid as a world-historic battle in the anti-Japanese

national-liberation struggle. The closing Act of the opera features a successful guerrilla attack on a walled city home to a Japanese garrison. The links to the events at Pochonobo are unmistakable, that is, on a conceptual level. It is plausible that Acts 2–7, even if taking place ten years after 1932, constitute an allegorical condensation of 1937.

## Social Universe

The *nationalist allegory* of *Sea of Blood* is bound up with the foundation legends of the North Korean state in general and the postcolonial heroic legend of Kim Il Sung in particular. Although Kim is not directly present in the martial peasant epic, the action relates to him on a symbolic level functioning as a metaphor at a distance. This narrative technique serves to legitimize his all-powerful dictatorship and the place of his son Kim Jong Il in the North Korean regime. The “revolutionary opera” does this by utilizing the root of all allegory, the *bellum intestinum* (internal war), which finds its immediate incarnation in the image of the longsuffering peasant Mother. As Kim Jong Il says in his primer on totalitarian Stalinist aesthetics *On the Art of the Cinema*: “The mother leads a tragic life before she stops being afraid of the enemy and takes the first step on the road of [national] revolution. Such is the course of [national] revolutionary development which slowly but steadily brings into being a new type of person” (2001b, pp. 40–41). That is to say, emotional-spiritual crisis and a baptism of fire are what forge this “new type of person,” this “*Juche*-type man” who embodies the highest aspirations and fundamental values of North Korean national-socialism (p. 13).

In portraying a “*Juche*-type man” in the form of the Mother, the allegorical conflict in *Sea of Blood* cannot afford to blur the distinctions between its characters, all of whom are syllogistic and antithetical personifications. All subaltern groups—guerrillas, peasants, the teacher, workers, women, youth—are categorically good. The sole Korean villain, Village Headman Pyon, an unrelenting collaborator with the Japanese colonial authority, is painted as a “puppet,” “swine,” and “treacherous.” All Japanese are categorically evil. The majority of them are anonymous, going by military designation specifically (commander, corporal, lieutenant, orderly, soldiers) except one Kumamoto, whose only role is dragging the Mother out of a garrison jail after she is tortured on suspicion of aiding the guerrillas. The Japanese are rendered in explicitly demonic terms: “accursed,” “beasts,” “cruel,” “devils,” “enemy,” “invaders,” “madmen,” “marauders,” and “vicious.” There is no denying that certain concrete social and historical forces are distilled into these flat characters. The fundamental flaw, however, is that no genuine or natural contradiction is worked into the personalities of the positive and negative figures. They are metaphysical (anti-dialectical) and ideologically ossified, lacking in organic necessity, and materialize like wooden dolls and effigies to sustain the formalistic dualism of the Manichaean allegorical universe.

Before the Mother achieves *Juche*-Stalinist nationalist consciousness, she naively

asks her husband Yun Sop, a participant in a tenant-farmer movement, why the Japanese came to Korea. He responds allegorically, juxtaposing a prelapsarian *belle epoch* against the dark age of colonial rule: “Korea’s clear rivers and graceful hills / From time immemorial have been a golden tapestry. / The accursed Japanese invaded our land, / To seize a thousand precious miles. / All 20 million of us must rise up in struggle / And fight, even if it cost us our lives” (*Sea of Blood*, 1977, pp. 7–8). Colonial Korea was, indeed, the arena of imperialist exploitation and the worst kind of fascist barbarism. Pre-colonial Korea, on the other hand, was not a pastoral fairy-land—it was a peasant and slave society ruled by a Confucian aristocracy. This, however, is peripheral to the ahistorical logic of *nationalist allegory*. Soon thereafter, a Japanese army raid befalls the family’s village. Yun Sop is captured and burned alive at the stake. The Mother and her children (save her infant son Ul Nam) witness this horror, which establishes martyrology and vengeance as central agencies of dramatic action in *Sea of Blood*, reinforcing also the *psychomachian* battleground of the Mother’s tried national soul. Afterwards, the Mother learns that another relative at neighboring Pyoljae has also been murdered and the village burned to the ground. Yet, before she has time to lapse into complete despair, she is told that a Korean guerrilla army has arisen. With this emboldening knowledge, she wanders with a group of refugees to Sangdong village in the vicinity of Mount Paekdu.

## The Holy Mountain

The motif of Mount Paekdu is crucial to the mythographic cosmology and topography of *Sea of Blood*. Traditionally associated with the supernatural origin tales of the Korean people, historically with the anti-colonial national-liberation struggles, and officially with the alleged birthplace of Kim Jong Il, the peak rests in the cosmogonic center of the narrative. Everything revolves in its mystical orbit. The *pangchang* sings: “Mt. Paekdu-san, ancestral mountain! / Soaring above the fatherland into the sky, / You embrace our five thousand years of history. / The dawn of national recovery will cast / A bright rainbow over sparkling / Lake Chonji at last” (*Sea of Blood*, 1977 p. 14). In another case, the *pangchang* says that Mount Fuji in Japan “cannot compare with Korea’s Mt. Paekdu-san” (p. 16). From this holy national mountain the Korean guerrillas descend like angels or knights who righteously smite the Japanese fascist hordes. The knight imagery specifically appears in part of a song by a group of girls milling and winnowing grain for the partisans: “The uniforms sewn stitch by stitch, / Like armour, will the guerrillas grace” (p. 33). This is conceptually linked with religious-moralistic references to the anti-colonial guerrilla war as a “glorious battle,” “sacred battle,” and “righteous struggle,” which will lead, with the participation of women, to “a bright new world.” (pp. 26, 28, 52, 39). More and more the narrative conveys the theme of national Holy War that is inherent to the *psychomachia*.

Mount Paekdu is also where the Mother sends her eldest son Won Nam to join Kim Il Sung’s guerrilla army and from whence she anticipates his triumphant return

to their liberated homeland. This hope is illustrated in a dream vision—one of the most typical features of the allegorical genre—which she experiences after she is beaten in the garrison jail. As the scene changes to a pastoral dreamscape with a thick forest, flowers, a gentle breeze, and red sun, the *pangchang* sings: “In her dreams the mother longs / For the dear daughter and sons / Whom she raised in hardship and sorrow.” “With that vision of her son gripping his rifle, / The mother swears to continue the fight. / I’ll meet my son, struggling devotedly for the revolution, / When our country is restored.” “He will return / On the day of national liberation. / I’ll meet my son, struggling devotedly for the revolution, / When the country is restored” (*Sea of Blood*, 1977, pp. 44–45). A mystified glorification of the gun and the role of violent force in history, the dream symbolism bespeaks an explicit rejection of the independent class standpoint of the working class, representing instead an apotheosis of the suicidal and intellectually bankrupt program of petty-bourgeois guerrillaism, the official explanation of the North Korean revolution. The armed peasantry is not the armed power of the industrial proletariat (Trotsky, 2002, p. 589). Moreover, petty-bourgeois guerrillaism failed in the Korean national-liberation struggle, as confirmed in Chong-Sik Lee’s *Revolutionary Struggle in Manchuria*.

The association of the mystical peak and eldest son serve to reinforce the Mother’s ideological commitment. That process is prefigured in other decisive events that culminate in the dream vision, but especially in the arrival of guerrilla operative Cho Dong Chun, the messenger from Mount Paekdu, who imparts homiletic instruction upon learning that the Mother is illiterate: “If you learn [to read], you’ll be better equipped to serve the revolution. When all the women—half the population—rise up, they will be a mighty force” (*Sea of Blood*, 1977, p. 25). This is followed by his refrain sung with the *pangchang*: “Women, all united, have the strength / To defeat any enemy.” As the Mother learns to read, tutored by her youngest son Ul Nam, no major transformation in her consciousness or perspective follows. She merely pictures “a new and joyful world” and achieves greater *faith* in the guerrilla army. Several months later, in the summer, the Mother becomes chairperson of the Women’s Association in Sangdong Village and collaborates with operative Cho in converting village women to the side of the guerrillas. After the dream vision and in the course of political work, events tragically climax in the autumn death of Ul Nam, who is shot by a Japanese corporal searching out Cho at the home of the Mother’s daughter, Gap Sun. It is worth noting that Kim Jong Il assigns central importance to the *nationalist allegory* of Ul Nam’s death, which he says epitomizes the terror of the 1930s, “the misfortune and suffering of the whole nation,” and the need for national-populist struggle (2001a, p. 107). This is true insofar as the primary metaphor remains the maternal allegory, which secures the thematic unity of *Sea of Blood*. Ul Nam, after all, functions as an element which, like his father Yun Sop, is forever torn from the Mother’s besieged national soul.

## National Family

Rather usefully, Korean film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim has said that *Sea of Blood* is a discourse of the nation in which the mother figure represents “the body of the nation” and “the nation’s individual subject” whose “individual subjectivity is collapsed into the national identity” (1996, p. 93). She is also “family matriarch” and “motherland” (p. 99). These are legitimate readings and can be supplemented with another level of allegorical interpretation which conditionally suggests that the Mother is also a symbol of the Workers’ Party of Korea, the so-called “mother party” of North Korea. A moral-political personification, the Mother is constructed as a general (non-individual) type who participates in the anti-colonial struggle of the 1930s. Her virtues and social character are to be identified with and emulated by the North Korean audience. She is not only a metaphor of the nation and party. She is a *positive hero* functioning allegorically as ideological apologia and as social defender of the national interests and national hopes of North Korean Stalinism. She is the maternal conservator of Kimilsungism.

Despite her prominent role, one should avoid overestimating the Mother by concluding that her female characterization and metaphor make *Sea of Blood* a matricentric text. On the contrary, the greater concern in the “revolutionary opera” is not so much with women as it is with the (national) family. As Kyung Hyun Kim says, the family is placed under threat when Yun Sop is murdered by the Japanese army, and the crisis of his displacement signifies the necessity for a patriarch (1996, p. 98). This point is elaborated by Hyangjin Lee in *Contemporary Korean Cinema* when she explains that *Sea of Blood* integrates the themes of “familyhood” and nationhood by employing three strategies to promote paternal authority. These are (1) “the replacement of the biological father with the symbolic one”; (2) “the elevation of maternal virtues as an alternative to the failure or absence of the biological father”; and (3) “the foregrounding of the eldest son as the legitimate heir to the family line” (2000, pp. 135–136). Kim Il Sung substitutes the martyred Yun Sop on the symbolic level as the “ultimate Father” of the Korean nation. Evincing a deep-seated *patricentric complex*—in which the central relationship is to the father or his socio-psychological equivalents (Fromm, 1970, pp. 97, 101)—the “revolutionary opera” asserts the Confucian family value of deference to the eldest son as successor in the paternal line, which Lee explains is relevant to the succession of Kim Jong Il as the eldest son and heir of Kim Il Sung (2000, p. 137).

The North Korean state, indeed, uses the maternal metaphor to exploit the emotional attachment and psychic submission to the mother, something that had been a mainstay of feudal Confucian patriarchy (Armstrong, 2003, p. 227). More specifically, however, it is the dogmatic Stalinist obsession with the family that is configured into the image of the Mother in *Sea of Blood*. While there is certainly a Confucian element, Confucianism belongs—perhaps more rightly—to the ideological and political prehistory of North Korean Stalinism. One should remember that North Korea was liberated from Japan and consolidated as a *deformed workers’ state* under the auspices of the Soviet military from 1945 to 1948. North Korean legislation, more-

over, sanctifies the family as the “cell” or “basic unit” of society, an idea rooted in Stalin-era Soviet jurisprudence—namely, the 1936 policy of “strengthening the family” which culminated in the Family Law of 1944. These conservative and fundamentally anti-Marxist laws institutionalized motherhood by stressing the reproductive, household, and educational roles of women in the autarkic national-socialist state. Despite formal pretensions to the equality of the sexes, women had no right to decline the “joys of motherhood” (Trotsky, 1991, p. 128). A decade before *Sea of Blood* was adapted to the stage, Kim Il Sung articulated the spirit, if not the letter, of these Soviet laws in his 1961 speech “The Duty of Mothers in the Education of Children.”

The Mother as *positive hero* and primary agency of the patricentric *nationalist allegory* in *Sea of Blood* is confirmed upon reading Kim’s hackneyed views of women. He readily acknowledges that the “family is a cell of society,” and he exacerbates the biological and political burden on women to rear North Korean children into faithful Stalinists (Kim Il Sung, 1971, p. 16). Kim considers the mother-child relationship to be the prototype of all social relationships. Thus he makes women a principal source of emulation: “The things that remain longest in our memories are our mother’s words and examples. The impressions mother gives have a great impact on the formation of man’s character and habits” (p. 17). There can be little disagreement that Kim’s outlook also conforms to the mystical Soviet-Stalinist idea of the mother as the “soul of the family” in the national-socialist state—a reactionary concept that is practically made for *psychomachian* literature. (Prudentius’ poem is dominated by allegorical female characters.) These views find their highest allegorical exemplification in the most famous scene in *Sea of Blood*, when the Mother opens the gates of the walled city, allowing the guerrilla knights to enter, destroy the garrison, and vanquish the Japanese fascist army. Her national soul is redeemed. She becomes a “new woman,” signifying that no obstacle can withstand the struggle of the Korean people for national independence (Kim Jong Il, 2001a, p. 138). Why should North Koreans not follow her heroic example?

The Mother speaks to irrational and infantile forces in the mind of the audience. She demands faith in her parental authority, compassion, and love. And the allegory of her suffering and triumph reflect a collective national-populist identity reinforced with blood and kinship metaphors. One cannot deny the heroic in the Mother as a tragedy-ridden woman struggling against the cyclopean forces of Japanese imperialism and colonialism. Depending on the level of social consciousness of the audience (which is captive in North Korea), there may be something compelling about her portrayal. The heroism, however, is contrived and springs from an artistically false image that is beholden to a subjectivist Party ideology and political stereotypes of the “*Juche*-type man.” Because it is a *nationalist allegory*, *Sea of Blood* does not aesthetically re-embody the living world of the 1930s, nor does it *realistically* capture the genuine nature and properties of the time, place, and people characteristic of that era. As a ritualistic and mystical narrative, *Sea of Blood* incorporates in pseudo-artistic form a *pure ideological* conception of the universe, which Engels defines as a deduction of reality from its mental representation and

not from life itself (1976, p. 121). Contrary to the North Korean claims of the “perfect” design of the opera, *a false idea cannot find a perfect artistic form* (Voronsky, 1998, p. 120). False content results in false form, and false form distorts real social relations. The “revolutionary opera” is therefore a failure as a work of *true art, as a form of cognition of life*.

Proportional to its religious monumentality, the allegorism of *Sea of Blood* lacks depth and complexity; its characters are anemic; and it sows deep political illusions in guerrillaism and Stalinism—neither of which can break the grip of the global profit system—by exploiting the image of the Mother. Yet, three decades after the premier of the opera, its aim and the official interpretation thereof are essentially the same. One Jin Ju Dong comments in a 2002 edition of the North Korean magazine *Korea* that the work is a “source of great encouragement” for the Korean People’s Army and people in the present era of Kim Jong Il’s “army-centered leadership” (2002, p. 20). As a fully asserted military dictatorship, the impoverished Stalinist regime continues to rely on the apocalypticism, ahistoricism, and epic dimensions of the *nationalist allegory*, which operates as a form of exhortatory propaganda that provokes the national populace to act; not to question, not to think. The “ignorant mountain people” for whom Kim Il Sung reportedly co-authored the original play script in 1936 have, in a way, been reincarnated in contemporary North Korea and transposed into the timeless mythopoeic struggle of this most un-revolutionary “revolutionary opera.”

## Conclusion

*Sea of Blood* is an anti-realist work whose inauthenticity arises from its abandonment of artistic and historical truth. Though no one can dispute the social traumas the Korean masses endured during the colonial and fascist turn of Japanese imperialism in the twentieth century, the *nationalist allegory* of the North Korean “revolutionary opera” deprives that human tragedy of all the seriousness it deserves in literary-dramatic representation. Mystifying and exploiting the image of the Mother and the nation, the opera willfully prevents its audience from gaining a more nuanced and profound image of socio-political reality. There is no genuine impulse to freedom here. The allegorical absence of complex characterization, realistic precision, and historical time forces the North Korean audience to surrender its critical faculties and historical memory to political fantasias, the fundamental purpose of which is to legitimate the rule of Stalinist-Bonapartist power and the theory of “socialism in one country.” The *nationalist allegory* demonstrates a natural contempt for the real world and, in its destruction of realism, creates a sanguinary wonderland that neither does justice to life nor to the people of the Korean Peninsula.

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